

GOD'S IMAGE IN *BAVLI B^ERAKOT*

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Resumo

O Tratado das Bênçãos do Talmude da Babilónia contém prescrições meticulosas dos sábios judaicos para que o judeu piedoso possa levar uma vida de santificação, em todos os momentos, de acordo com a Lei mosaica. Da análise desses preceitos e sentenças, cujo eco se encontra na literatura mística judaica, que foi vendo a luz desde a Antiguidade tardia, através dos séculos, até à actualidade, emerge uma representação do Deus de Israel de que aqui se delineiam os principais traços, e que poderia condensar-se num prisma de luz e sombra de variegadas faces.

Palavras-chave: Deus, homem, Lei, livre, oração.

Abstract

The Treatise of Blessings of the Babylonian Talmud contains meticulous precepts established by the Jewish sages aiming to teach the pious Jews to lead a sanctifying life, in every moment, according to the Law of Moses. Echoes of such principles may be found in all Jewish mystical literature, since late Antiquity up to these days. From them emerges an image of the God of Israel whose traits are drawn in this study, which we could condense in a multifaceted, multicoloured prism, all made of shadow and light.

Key-words: God, man, Law, free, prayer.

The Treatise of Blessings of the Babylonian Talmud, known as *Maseket B^erakot*¹, collects rabbinic sayings and teachings about the best way of reciting Jewish customary prayers and praises, and has the purpose of establishing precise rules and prescriptions for the pious Jews to lead a blameless, sanctifying life according to the Law of the God of Israel.

I set out to make an analysis of the rabbis' authoritative opinions and instructions in *B^erakot* and of the two main Jewish prayers they consider, the *Š^ema* and the *Š^{mon}eh 'Eš^{re}h*, in order to construct a representation of the God of Israel, as his attributes emerge from the different pleas and praises spoken by his faithful people every day. I took into account the several utterances of blessing the pious Jews recite in their daily life with the same purpose, as well as some concepts from subsidiary theurgical and mystical Jewish literature. Needless to say, the narrative from some books of the Pentateuch is also considered. The quotations and references from *B^erakot* are set in brackets in the text.

The mystics say that in the beginning, before time existed, God was alone. He then invented a code, or instrument, wrought within the cosmos, containing the secret of creation, an unutterable name of his. He first made his Law, the *Torah*, with the Hebrew letters; these were beautiful princesses with crowns on their heads, so the Lord would look at them and be glad, and in his delight he would watch them play in his presence, and he would also play with them.² It is known that he afterwards created the natural world, that he created man, and that he delighted in their making.

Lapping over time, we come to observe that somewhere along the ages God became disappointed with man, who turned to be disobedient, cruel and unfaithful, and sent all kinds of misery either to destroy him or to call him to reason. After a

¹ I used *Bavli* Vilna's classical edition of *Maseket B^erakot* adapted from Schottenstein's, Edmond J. SAFRA ed. 2003/2006, New York, I/II.

² EISENBERG/STEINSALZ^b 1988 66; MOPSIK^b 1981 38-40.

devastating attempt of destroying the whole world, he then made a covenant with man, promising never to try to annihilate him again. Finally, he decided to look upon a particular group, the Hebrews, to choose these people for him alone, to have them love and respect him exclusively. With that aim, he redeemed them from the slavery in which they lived in a foreign country and took them to a special land he promised to them, and he gave them his most precious thing - the *Torah*.

The *Šma*‘, the prayer that Jews have to recite twice a day, is extracted from the *Torah* (Dt 6:4-9, Dt 11:13-21 and Num 15:37-41), and states the injunctions set by God on the Jewish people, who call themselves Israel. It begins with a vehement demand from God: “Listen, O Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord your God is one”! The people are then instructed to love their God above all things, with all their hearts, with all their souls and with all their might, and to tell and repeat to their children this commandment of eternal and exclusive love. Furthermore, they have to meditate about it at all times, when they walk and when they sit to rest in their homes, when they go to bed and when they get up in the morning, and they have to write it down and to tie it to their arms, to set it upon their brows and on their doors.

Therefore, the first thing God wants the people to understand is that, differently from the gods of the other nations, their own God is one only, that he requires all their strength and devotion, and suffers no other thought in their heads but the thought of him and his cult. The people are destined to be God’s beloved, chosen one, his joy, and through their perfection, they are meant to lead all the other nations to God, and thus reconcile him with his creation.

In the next verses, the *Šma*‘ contains the promises made by the God of Israel as a counterpart for the people’s love. They will possess a great land, with abundance of cattle and fruits, they will have plenty of rain to ensure their wealth and they will

settle in it forever and rejoice with their God. But then a warning follows. If the people fail to fulfill God's commandments, and look up to other gods, or if they do not revere him as he requires, a terrible punishment awaits them: the Lord will cause them to be lost among the lands, and they will never find the promised land with all its riches; the ground will become dry and they will starve, for "*w^elo' Yhwh maṭar*", "God would not rain".³ This expression allows us to consider that God is either the god of rain or storm (like the Canaanite god Adad, for instance), or he is the essence of the whole universe: the rain is an emanation of his.

So we can see that God's decree of love carries with it a terrible curse: it does not give room to failure, it ruthlessly foresees and prevents any possible escape from his protection, either by means of material signs (to wear upon the people's bodies and on their houses), or by means of psychological coercion. They are threatened with the anguish of seeing their cherished illusion shattered to pieces (the good promised land) and with the specter of the one thing man fears above all others: death, that he cannot understand or control.

This fear shown by the God of Israel that his people might relinquish his worship gives evidence of the one power humanity holds against God: their free will. Men (even the chosen ones) are free to choose, among the several existing gods, which god they desire to love, and God clearly knows that the heart of man is drawn to other adventures. Thus, he lures him with further promises, provided man gives him his unconditional loyalty (Dt 11:21): the days of the children of Israel and their descendents will be countless and they will experience heavenly delights in the land the Lord kept for them.

³ Dt 11:17, *Biblia Sacra Utriusque Testamenti Editio Hebraica et Graeca* 1998.

In the third part of the *Šema*’, the God of Israel coldly reminds his people of all the benefits they received from him since he rescued them from slavery and recalls that every single Jewish male is responsible for his own family, and for instructing them and making them respect the Lord’s decrees. In addition, he demands that his chosen people wear still another symbol to bind them to him: the men of Israel will have to add fringes to their clothes, as well as a strong-coloured cord, to mark their faithfulness to their God, so that every other people will recognize them as the one God’s worshippers, and so that they will never forget that their whole beings belong to him (Num 15:39).

This is another sign illustrating that God is afraid of not being obeyed and that he does not trust his people to feel for him the same love he apparently feels for them. He seems to forebode that, sooner or later, Israel will choose to give up his ways and to go after other gods, equally attractive, perhaps more seducing, easier to worship, less demanding. In fact, people around the children of Israel had different customs and several religious cults that Israel could be tempted into following. The verb used in Dt. 11:16, *tur*, translated as “seduce”, means “to look for, to go astray”, but also “to explore, to recognize”, and Num 15:39 warns the people not to let their hearts or their eyes drag them into sin. God doubts lest his people should actively search for other gods and be corrupted (from the Hebrew root *zanah*, “to dishonor, to prostitute oneself, to be unfaithful”).

As in the book of Hosea, the metaphor uses the relationship between husband and wife, of total yielding, love and fidelity that is a sacrilege to break. In order to avoid this sacrilege, as an envious lover keeps his beloved one to himself alone, the God of Israel ties his people to him through their commitment and their secret fears.

He even makes himself constantly present by means of strong physical marks, in their bodies, their clothes and their homes.

In Num 15:40-41, the Lord reiterates his command that Israel always abide by all his injunctions (*kol mišwoti*) and thus transforms his own people into a sacrifice, a sacred object to their God, as stated in the expression: “*hayitem qdošim l’elohekem*”, “you shall be sacred unto your God”. He insists in recalling the debt of eternal gratitude that Israel has towards him, for having brought the people from slavery with the purpose of making them *his* holy people. Such debt can be repaid only through an everlasting love and scrupulous worship. In the end of the prayer, the Lord reiterates his own identity as the exclusive God of Israel, who unconditionally belongs to him.

So the children of Israel learned the Lord’s names, and their priests used to pronounce them when they blessed the assembly of the people. The High Priest, or *Kohen Gadol*, used to wear on his chest a cloth, the *hošen*, adorned with twelve precious stones, on which the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were engraved. Within the stones, there was a parchment on which the secret names of the Lord were written, the so-called *’urim wtumim*, “light and perfection”, two attributes of the God of Israel. They would grant the High Priest enlightenment to direct and counsel the people whenever they would come to him for help about any kind of question (according to the *Gaon of Vilna*, *apud Ber. II, 5:31b*¹).

In time, however, the people grew to overlook their Lord’s decrees and the moral level of the priests became lower and lower. When Israel began forgetting the precepts of the *Torah*, the ancient priests also began swallowing the sacred Names, until at last this knowledge was lost and it became forbidden to pronounce the name of God⁴, who estranged himself from his people (*Ber. II, 5:31b*¹).

⁴ COHEN 2002 97-99; *Mishnah Ber. 9.5*; ZAHAVY^b 1986 6.23.

As the children of Israel forsook the Law they fell back into sin, and God's wrath was awoken. But as the people began to suffer humiliation and conquests, deportation and destruction of their cities and kingdoms, God himself suffered too, as a father would when seeing his children in distress. When his Temple was brought down and his presence departed, leaving the people to themselves, he complained with high laments, like a wounded lion, according to the *Rav*:⁵

[AS] Woe to [my] children,

[AT] for, because of their faults, I destroyed My Temple

[AU] and I made my Sanctuary to burn.

Then God shows his sadness and tells about the happy king whom his subjects praise in his palace, whereas he, the creator of life, does not even possess that simple joy. God's royalty becomes diminished before the nations with the destruction of his temple (*Ber. I, 1:3a*^{1/4}).

Emmanuel Lévinas explains this apparently absurd impotence of the God of Israel. When one decides to exercise his free will and stays away from God, this constitutes a desecration of the divine crafter of creation, for evil is inscribed in man's disobedience. Man's independence is God's mishap.⁶ The philosopher Maimonides used to say that the Lord possesses nothing but the awe of man and the four '*amot* ("cubits") of the *halakah* (the norm)⁷. God's only treasure is the compliance with his Law, that he designed in such a way that he himself has to abide by it.

Metaphysics obey to their own laws, so men cannot sin without damaging the soul of the world. The Lord has made laws that he cannot unmake, he must comply

⁵ *Rabbi Abba bar Aybo*, who founded the community of Sura, in Babylonia, for the systematic study of rabbinic traditions (175-247 C.E.) (ZAHAVY^a (2006) *Encyclopaedia of Religion - Rabbinic Biographies*).

⁶ LÉVINAS^b 1982 119-120.

⁷ Four '*amot* represented the space that the Sages attributed to any student of theirs, i.e., the place occupied by a *Torah* scholar who dedicates himself to define the application of the Law (*Ber. I, 1:8a*⁴).

with them himself, and he cannot have power over them, no more than he can control man's free will. He has, however, the authority to encourage repentance through chastisement, hoping that men seek to be reconciled with him through the theurgical means they may use, thus restoring the order of the universe.⁸

Indeed, man has a performative power over the deity, hence a serious responsibility. There are five different types of action, or theurgical influence, on God: a) founding, which has the purpose of establishing the deity (as the king of Israel and Lord of the covenant, for instance, by means of the respective rituals); b) restorative, aiming to heal the deteriorated divine form, through sacrifices, expiation rites and prayers; c) amplifying, which makes God's power to invigorate; d) conservative, which has the purpose of sustaining the divine stability; e) attractive, aiming to call the deity to descend upon men.⁹

Through their prayers, God's people establish the royalty of the Holy One over the world. When Israel prays, its words are transformed into spiritual substances by the great archangel Sandalphon, who intertwines the Jewish people's prayers into a crown, and invokes the name of the Lord to set it on his head. Therefore, God's kingship depends on his people's prayers – for what is a king without his subjects? – and the people's virtuous deeds have a founding and healing action over the heavenly powers.¹⁰

When we turn to analyze the prayer of the Eighteen Blessings, or *Šmoneh 'Ešreh*,¹¹ we look at some different features of the God of Israel. The prayer, meant to be recited three times a day, contains eighteen utterances of praise to the Creator, stating among them attributes that we cannot find in the *Šema*'. The people begin with

⁸ EISENBERG/STEINSALZ^a 1999 63.

⁹ MOPSIK^a 1993 42-51.

¹⁰ Ibidem 58.

¹¹ A full text of the *Amidah* may be found in Hebrew in SCHECHTER/ABRAHAMMS 1898 654-661. An English translation is available, among others, in ALEXANDER 2007 821.

an anamnesis meant to ingratiate the Lord so that he may look upon them, recalling that he is above all the God of Israel's ancestors, to whom he revealed himself and with whom he made a particular covenant. They acclaim him as the Lord who humiliates the proud and calls the arrogant to justice, and praise him too as the Lord of nature, who rules the rain and the dew. It is by the kindness of his heart that everything grows and fructifies, that life is granted to the living. He is eternal and has also the power to give life back to the dead.

One of the blessings sings God's exceptional attribute of sanctity and his absolute perfection. He is "*ha'El haqqadoš*",¹² the definite article stressing his distinctive singularity before all the other gods, who are obviously flawed. Eisenberg and Steinsalz explain that the concept of sanctity in Judaism refers to what lies outside every human limit, there where you cannot reach, a unique place beyond good and evil.¹³

A different face of God may be found in the so-called "blessing of knowledge". He is called *'avinu*, "our father", which shows that the people are addressing him collectively. The people plea for wisdom, and ask their God to grant them the ability to assimilate his teachings and his laws, and the competence to tell good from evil, right from wrong. In other words, the people are asking their God to teach them to pray and to become his holy children, as they recognize that the instrument to attain such goals is in their own hands, the *Torah* that the Holy One provided them with, which they have to study and cherish.

One of the blessings shows us the disastrous condition in which men find themselves when they choose not to attend to their God's Law. The Lord, feeling that his people are not loving him as they ought to, either hides his face from them or

¹² SCHECHTER/ABRAHAMS op. cit. 657.

¹³ 1999 op. cit.^a 50-51.

disappears, leaving them on their own. Their experience in their helplessness is so ruinous that they feel the need to induce him, through expiation and imploring supplications, to forgive their sins and to go back to them, so that they may adore him again,¹⁴ and they praise him as the Lord who longs for repentance.

In the next blessings, precisely, the people raise their voices to acknowledge the immense mercy of their God, who comes to grant them his pardon due to his attribute of compassion, an adjective that comes from the Hebrew root *reḥem*, “womb”, therefore expecting from him what is usually expected from a gentle, loving mother. The Rabbinic sages represent their God with a mild, tender heart who can be moved by his children’s entreaties, as a mother would be before her child’s pleas: R. Eliezer¹⁵ used to say that the prayer of the righteous is like a pitchfork; as the latter turns the wheat, so the sincere prayer turns God’s disposition from anger to mercy.¹⁶ Along with this maternal quality, God is a healer, curing both his people’s afflicted minds and their bodies.

In seven of the blessings of the *Šmoneh ‘Ešreh*, the God of Israel is hailed as a great warrior, the refuge and shield of Israel, the High One who is to be dreaded and revered. He is the people’s defender against all their attackers, a rescuer who redeems them from pain, repression and misery; a victorious ruler, who judges and punishes the evildoers, annihilates their enemies and distributes justice all over the land. This mighty God will sound trumpets of victory to reassemble the Jewish people who have been dispersed all over the world and gather them all in the promised land, in his holy city, Jerusalem, that he shall make to be rebuilt. He shall give the country a new king

¹⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the wording of this blessing, see José A. M. RAMOS 1990 211/222 and C. Maria A. FERNANDES 2011 (M.A. Dissertation), Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa 61-65.

¹⁵ R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, a *tanna*’ of the second generation of the Rabbinic sages, taught in Lydda (STRACK/STEMBERGER 1996 69-70).

¹⁶ EISENSTEIN 1905 10.164-171.

as in the days of old, and his temple, too, shall be reconstructed and his presence shall descend again upon his chosen ones. As in the days of old, they shall revere and worship him and sing his glory before every nation.

Contrasting with this feature of a powerful lord of war who sounds to battle and protects his people, the prayer's ending blessings celebrate the gracious God who makes and grants peace, who willingly listens to his people's requests, to whom it is good to honour and to express gratitude.

This attribute of the God of Israel is found in *B^erakot*, mainly in the chapters dealing with the people's utterances of blessing. Israel's gratitude for the Lord is sung every day, in every daily act, from morning to evening, at meals, at work, in the houses of study, along the ways, for the scents of woods and flowers, for the perfume of fruits, for the beauty of the whole nature. Israel hails its God expressing its unending love and thanks for all the benefits he bestowed on the people and the country.

These sounds of blessing act over the Holy One in such a way that he diffuses onto the world a supplement of light and holiness, his immanent feature. The blessing *formulae* used by the people of Israel when they exalt their Lord (*baruk hu'*, *baruk 'attah*) and their eulogizing words continue the work of creation, they guarantee the original covenant with God and assure the eternal union between God and man; otherwise creation would already have ceased. Thus, the pious man, when set deep in prayer with all his heart and mind (in a state of *kawwanah*, or "profound concentration") is responsible for the perpetual renewal of the world.¹⁷

In fact, the God of Israel welcomes this special type of expression above all others, the one that does not actually *pray*, i.e., that does not beseech or entreat, but

¹⁷ GROSS 1984 225-244.

only raises the subject's thoughts and soul to the Lord in adoration or contemplation. Such expressions intensify God's power into the world of men. When, for instance, the Jewish people recite the *Šma*¹⁸, if they pronounce each letter and word separately and carefully, they are enlarging the Almighty's strength (*Ber.* I, 2:15b⁵). Through such recitation twice a day, therefore, the faithful Jew exercises an amplifying action over his God, whose ontological force is increased.

Men's theurgical action of healing becomes necessary to the deity due to their persistent faults, for human sin deteriorates the divine form. We have seen that man has a power that enables him to antagonize God, and that is his free will, since the Lord cannot control the human faculty to shape intention. Man's arrogance and self-sufficiency defy God, disfigure creation and make the order of the world to quiver.¹⁸ Only by means of their repentance and rituals of expiation, performed with a true penitent heart, are men able to restore the divine unity that impiety has broken.

Men's expressions of blessing and praising the Lord have not only a conservative theurgical action, but also an attractive effect on the deity, who pours life over the world when he hears man invoking him by his sacred names or attributes.¹⁹ The God of Israel is said to favour his people especially above all others for that reason, for thus he speaks to his angels:

[L] And why should I not favour Israel?

[M] For I have written in my *Torah*:

[N] 'And you will eat your fill, and you will praise the Lord your God.'

[O] And they are meticulous with themselves

[P] [as to bless me] even [for food having the volume of] an olive

¹⁸ NEUSNER 2002 104; EISENBERG/STEINSALZ^a 1999 50-51.

¹⁹ MOPSIK^a 1993 47, 161.

[Q] or [with the volume of] an egg! (*Ber.* I, 3:20b⁴).

Furthermore, some formulary doxologies were believed to possess a supernatural effectiveness that bestowed an amplifying effect on the deity, since it is the exercise of man's free will in recognizing and extolling the divine attributes that confers a supplement of strength to God. He needs such praises both to operate miracles and to vanquish foes.²⁰

There are innumerable examples in the Treatise of Blessings showing the importance of honouring the Lord. Among them, we find the formula of the prelude to the *Hallel* recited in Easter's liturgy: "So, it is our duty to thank, to enhance, to praise, to glorify, to exalt, to magnify, to bless, to elevate and to celebrate He who operated all these miracles in favour of our forefathers, and in our favour" (*Ber.* II, 7:50a²). When reciting the *Šema*, there are blessings to be said: two before the prayer, and one afterwards, in the morning, and two before it, and two afterwards, in the evening. One of them includes a hymn known as the *trisagion*, proclaiming three times the sanctity of the Lord, and it is believed that when Israel recites it, the angels in heaven chant it as well. Another one, the "blessing of redemption", is an anamnesis of the story of the people since their liberation from Egypt until their coming to the promised land, and sings God's steady, eternal love (*Ber.* I, 1). Two of them hail the Lord as the creator of light and shadow, and we observe that the rabbis changed the former words of the prayer, that acknowledged God as the maker of light and darkness. Many sages deemed that darkness was evil, that it was not suitable to recognize that God had formed it, and they thought they should say instead "who formed the twilight" as a more fitting alternative (*Ber.* I, 1:11b¹).

²⁰ LÉVINAS^a 1996 25.

Therefore, prayer (in its beseeching as in its extolling speeches) is the ritual that supplies the deity with the necessary means to bring justice and good to this world, and neither men nor the Holy One may do without it. For the Lord has given Israel the commandments so that his glory and his sanctity be exalted at all times, and holiness is essential to the health of the God of Israel.²¹

At this point, I would ask why God needs these theurgical actions from his people. We have seen that he is diminished when his people sin, so restorative expiation prayers and rites are indispensable. However, in the absence of men's transgressions, since conservative prayers are necessary, this would mean that without this support to keep his integrity, God will be equally lessened, and his apprehension regarding his people's imperfect love points in that direction too. Moreover, if, as we have seen, the prayers of the pious increase God's ontological force, we may infer that he is affected in his own essence when his people fail him. The blessing *formulae* that consecrate the God of Israel are crucial to his health, which implies that he will get ill without the people's extolling utterances. Clearly, his strength is reduced, the effectiveness of his intervention loses vigour. And if blessing words are needed for God to diffuse his light and love upon the world, and to call his presence to descend, then at some point he must have left his people, turned away or gone far from the world, leaving it and them unattended. We could ask where the problem is: is it man who caused the Lord to turn from him, due to his transgressions and ungratefulness, or is it God who sometimes gets tired of his creation and withdraws - in order to rest, or to regain patience?

On the other hand, the Lord needs praise to perform miracles and to vanquish foes. I do not think this is meant only for Israel's foes, but for God's, as well. Who are

²¹ LÉVINAS^a 1996 25.

they? Man's free will, for one, and I would say his hidden dark face, for another, what some mystics call his *g^evurah*, or rigour, opposed to his mercy or grace, *hesed*, his face of light.

As I proceeded along this path, I have been seeing the formation of an image of the God of Israel like a prism with several faces, each one with a different characteristic. I first look at a sad, lonely Being, craving for beauty and company, hence crafting creation for sheer delight. One of the most important items of that creation, man, disappointed him bitterly; this allows us to consider that somewhere God himself lost his track, for he did not envisage all the consequences of his making. In order to avoid further disillusion with his creatures, God chose a particular group of people who found themselves in dire need, saved them from their terrible condition and settled them as to ensure they would return his love without question. He thus became their advocate, defender and redeemer. He directed the people to a special land, promised them abundance of provisions and descendants, and all the happiness the earth can give to man. So he is a provider, he commands the elements of nature and grants life and bliss.

The people's way to that promised land was long, painful and they suffered heavy difficulties and wars, which they vanquished with the assistance of their God. He is then a valiant warrior, fearful and terrible. The people were settled, were provided with rulers and established a temple with appointed priests who assured the cult and were the intermediates between the Lord and his people. In his sanctuary, the God of Israel reigns, like a king who brings justice to the land and has a court of subjects to attend to him— his holy priests.

However, God's love is not unconditional: he requires absolute loyalty, unceasing adoration and he demands to be the sole Being who the people may

worship. He threatens the people with terrible punishment in case they do not comply strictly with all his requirements. He ties them to him and, like a fierce gaoler, or a despotic husband, he makes himself constantly present by means of strong physical signs. After having ensnared the people with visions of an earthly paradise, he then menaced them with the horrors of famine and death. We are looking at a shrewd, jealous God, afraid that he has not the faculty of making man love him as he will.

Once again, this gives evidence of an incident over which God lost control at some point, some miscalculation. I might consider, at this point, that he is not omniscient, in the same way that he is not omnipotent; he cannot retrace certain steps of his. But he can retaliate, and so he does. Man is free to choose, but when he does choose differently, he finds himself in such a misery that he is compelled to go back lest he is exterminated. One step astray, and God strikes. He is implacable in his vengeance, he either sulks or hides, he acts deaf to his people, leaves them with a dismaying feeling of desert. Contrarily to man, he is free to loosen his anger when he pleases.

This would be the ineffable face of God that the Sages avoided, not being willing to recognize that the Holy One had created evil. If they accepted that, they would be forced to accept that darkness is part of the Lord's attributes. Their careful, obsessive prescriptions to ensure the observation of the Law are evidence of their awe for the God of Israel, that the people themselves qualify as *hannora*’, the fearful.²²

The love that God feels for his people is, however, the source of his sorrow. And here we uncover yet another face of the God of Israel, the one *B^erakot* pictures the most. God is a caring father to whom his children appeal in order to grow in understanding and knowledge. He teaches them the right way, but he cannot command

²² In the *Šmoneh ‘Ešreh*’s first blessing (Blessing of the Patriarchs): ‘Blessed are you, O Lord, God of our Fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob, great (*haggadol*), mighty (*haggibbor*) and fearful (*hannora*’) God...’, ALEXANDER op. cit. 821.

their will or control their behaviour. So he suffers every time something bad happens to them; whenever they are in anguish, he is in anguish. He is a healer and a consoler, who tends their wounds and gives them solace in their distress. He is compassionate, like a mother who weeps for her lost, sinful son, he is a rescuer, and he offers refuge and forgiveness. His patience, like his love, is everlasting, and he never gives up the hope to bring his children back to what he created them for, perfection. He longs to contemplate them, as in the beginning of times, in light and in bliss, and thus preserve his own gleaming essence. For the choice God made of Israel does not only compromise the people, but binds him to them as well. In the same way that Israel does not cease to remind him of their covenant, God recalls all he did in favour of the people, because none of them can endure without the other. Prayer is the leverage that keeps the universe in balance; that is why God prays, too, so that his *hesed* may overcome his *g^evurah*, i.e., that his mercy may overpower his strictness (*Ber.* I, 1:6a^{3/4}, I, 1:7a^{1/2}).

This multiple-faced God contains in his self all the traits with which he featured mankind, love being the most vital, a blessing as well as a curse, for both God and men live for it in bliss and live for it in woe. For God's children seem to have lost, somewhere, their way to perfection, which they too could touch in the beginning of times, and therefore the power to behold their Lord.

God possesses, however, a particular attribute that is his alone: transcending good and evil, he is unique hence, he is fearful. Before God's might, the pious can only meditate and follow the words of R. Eliezer: "and when you pray, know before Whom you are standing" (*Ber.* I, 4:28b²).

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